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ABSTRACT

In 1995 the School Board of Philadelphia adopted Children Achieving, a systemic reform initiative. This report is an evaluation of that reform. The report examines the role of the central office and describes its evolution over the course of the program. The first section recounts how conflicts arose over theories of systemic reform, underlying beliefs and values of reformers, and the new role of the central office in the reform plan. The second section examines the capacity of the school district to effectively support the reform and discusses the contextual issues that affected implementation. The evaluation used data on student test scores, promotion and graduation rates, and student and teacher attendance; school indicators describing teacher and student characteristics; and surveys and interviews of teachers, students, administrators, central-office staff, parents, and community members. The report concludes that Children Achieving was neither an unbridled success nor an irredeemable failure. Test scores improved, standards and curriculum frameworks were created for every grade, and accountability measures were designed. At the same time, flaws in the implementation, lack of capacity building, and inconsistency by stakeholders over the values underlying the reform led to the reform's demise. (Contains 92 footnotes.) (WFA)

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Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools

Ellen Foley

August 2001

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN ACHIEVING CHALLENGE

In February 1995 shortly after the School Board of Philadelphia adopted *Children Achieving* as a systemic reform agenda to improve the Philadelphia public schools, the Annenberg Foundation designated Philadelphia as one of a few American cities to receive a five-year $50 million Annenberg Challenge grant to improve public education.

Among the conditions for receiving the grant was a requirement to raise two matching dollars ($100 million over five years) for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation and to create an independent management structure to provide program, fiscal, and evaluation oversight of the grant. In Philadelphia, a business organization, Greater Philadelphia First, assumed this responsibility, and with it, the challenge of building and sustaining civic support for the improvement of public education in the city.

Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* was a sweeping systemic reform initiative. Systemic reform eschews a school-by-school approach to reform and relies on coherent policy, improved coordination of resources and services, content and performance standards, decentralization of decision-making, and accountability mechanisms to transform entire school systems. Led by a dynamic superintendent and central office personnel, *Children Achieving* was the first attempt by an urban district to test systemic reform in practice.

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING

In 1996 the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and its partner, Research for Action (RFA) were charged by the *Children Achieving* Challenge with the evaluation of *Children Achieving*. Between the 1995-1996 and 2000-2001 school years, CPRE and RFA researchers interviewed hundreds of teachers, principals, parents, students, district officials, and civic leaders; sat in on meetings where the plan was designed, debated, and revised; observed its implementation in classrooms and schools; conducted two system-wide surveys of teachers; and carried out independent analyses of the District's test results and other indicators of system performance. An outline of the research methods used by CPRE and RFA is included in this report. A listing of the reports on *Children Achieving* currently available from CPRE is found below. There will be several additional reports released in the coming months. New reports will be listed and available as they are released on the CPRE web site at www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING'S THEORY OF ACTION

To assess the progress and effects of a comprehensive reform such as *Children Achieving*, it is essential to understand its "theory of action," that is, the assumptions made about what actions or behaviors will produce the desired effects. A summary of the *Children Achieving* theory of action follows:

Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing; and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt, or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the District's high standards.

ADDITIONAL READING ON CHILDREN ACHIEVING

The following publications on the evaluation of the *Children Achieving* are currently available through CPRE at (215) 573-0700.

- Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Keys to Improving the Philadelphia Public Schools (May 2001)
- School Leadership and Reform: Case Studies of Philadelphia Principals (May 2001)
- Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools (August 2001)
- Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000 (August 2001)

DISCLAIMER

The research reported herein was conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action. Funding for this work was provided by Greater Philadelphia First and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Opinions expressed in this report are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Greater Philadelphia First, The Pew Charitable Trusts, or the institutional partners of CPRE.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING EVALUATION 1995-2001: RESEARCH METHODS

During the past five years, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action used the research methods indicated below in their evaluation of the *Children Achieving* Challenge.

1. 1996-2000 school-level data on indicators that made up the District's Performance Responsibility Index including student scores on the SAT-9, student promotion and graduation rates, student attendance, and teacher attendance.

2. Two census surveys of teachers, the first in 1997 and the second in 1999. Teachers were asked about reform implementation, school conditions, and teaching practices. There was a greater than 60 percent response rate on both surveys.

3. School indicators describing teacher and student characteristics in 1996 and 1999 obtained from the School District of Philadelphia's Information Services. These data included school enrollment, number of teachers, the proportion of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, among other indicators. These data were used for descriptive purposes and in hierarchical linear and logistic regression models to help understand the relationships among reform implementation, student outcomes, and school characteristics.

4. Five years (1995-1996 through 1999-2000) of qualitative research in 49 schools (26 elementary, 11 middle, and 12 high schools) in 14 clusters. Qualitative research included: interviews of teachers, principals, parents, outside partners who worked in the schools, and in a few cases, students; observations of classrooms, SLC meetings, professional development sessions, and school leadership team meetings; and review of school documents (School Improvement Plan, budget, etc.). Intensive, multi-year case study research in a subset of 25 schools (13 elementary, 5 middle, and 7 high schools).

5. Interviews of central office and cluster staff and observations of meetings and other events.

6. Interviews of 40 Philadelphia civic leaders (included political leaders, leaders in the funding community, public education advocates, journalists, and business leaders).

In addition, numerous other studies conducted during *Children Achieving* informed this evaluation. These included: Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett's three-year interview study of middle school students; an evaluation of the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative in Mathematics and Science conducted by Research for Action; the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study conducted by Frank Furstenberg at the University of Pennsylvania; and

the evaluation of the William Penn Foundation's initiative in two clusters conducted by the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE IN REFORM

The central administrators of school districts have only rarely been the focus of education research. Still, the prevailing attitude is that districts are either irrelevant to or inhibitors of reform. Studies of school-based reform efforts often conclude that central office policies impede innovation. The proposals for school choice, charter schools, vouchers, and contract schools are a response, at least in part, to the perceived ineffectiveness of school districts. States and the federal government, more and more, provide funding directly to schools, rather than via district central offices. And in 1994, the Annenberg Foundation's $500 million "Challenge" pledge, the largest gift to urban public education ever made, bypassed the school district's central offices as a mechanism of reform in nearly every site where it operated.

The School District of Philadelphia was the one exception in the latter case. Philadelphia's *Children Achieving*, funded through a $150 million Annenberg Challenge grant,[1] was a sweeping "systemic reform" initiative.[2] A relatively new theory of education reform, systemic reform eschews a school-by-school reform approach and relies on the use of content and performance standards, decentralization, and accountability mechanisms to transform entire school systems. Led by central office personnel, *Children Achieving* was among the first attempts to put a systemic reform theory to a test.

In this report, we examine the role of the central office in this reform and describe its evolution over the course of *Children Achieving*.[3] The first section of the report recounts how conflicts arose about the theory of systemic reform, some of the Philadelphia reformers' underlying beliefs and values, and the new roles envisioned for the central office in the *Children Achieving* reform plan. Central office staff struggled with the competing demands of accountability, decentralization, and equity. What was envisioned as a coherent and interconnected set of strategies was not always implemented or perceived in that way. One result of the confusion and inconsistencies in reform theory, design, and implementation was a gradual, but consistent, retreat from

[1] Of the $150 million, $50 million was provided by the Annenberg Foundation, and $100 million from local matching contributions.

[2] In this report, the term "systemic reform" is used to connote an array of reform policies, including content and performance standards, accountability mechanisms, and decentralization. We use the term "system-wide reform" to refer to reform across entire districts, which is not necessarily "systemic reform" (i.e., based on standards, accountability, and decentralization, as defined above). We use the term "standards-based" when we are discussing the implications of content and performance standards in particular.

[3] Results of the reforms are reported in companion documents that will be published in mid-2001. For the most up-to-date information on these publications, please contact CPRE at (215) 573-0700 or visit our web site: www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/.

what initially was a key facet of the plan: decentralization of authority from the central office to schools.

The second part of the report examines the capacity of the school district to effectively support the reforms and discusses the contextual issues that affected implementation. We argue that insufficient attention to the knowledge, skills, and beliefs of educators at all levels of the system as well as the alienation of important district partners, limited the human, social, and fiscal capital available to the district. This left the district without the resources it needed to take on a reform of the magnitude of *Children Achieving*.

The Philadelphia story is neither one of unbridled success nor irredeemable failure. In addition to notable test score improvements highlighted in other CPRE reports, Philadelphia created content standards in every subject, benchmarks at important transition grades, and curriculum frameworks for every grade. The District also designed and implemented complex accountability measures for schools, reorganized into clusters of schools and small learning communities, provided new learning opportunities for teachers, and wrestled with the implementation of systemic reform. But the hopes that greeted this ambitious reform when it began were never fulfilled. After David Hornbeck resigned as Superintendent in August 2000, *Children Achieving* was all but dismantled. Our analysis suggests that a combination of factors contributed to the demise of *Children Achieving* including: flaws in the theory of action, flaws in implementation, lack of capacity and lack of attention to building capacity, and inconsistency by stakeholders about the beliefs and values underlying the reform effort. The final section of the report draws on the experience of Philadelphia, both the successes and the challenges, to provide lessons for other districts taking on systemic reform.

BACKGROUND TO PHILADELPHIA'S CHILDREN ACHIEVING REFORM

The ultimate goal of the *Children Achieving* initiative was to do what "no city with any significant number and diversity of students" had ever done: help "a large proportion of its young people achieve at high levels."[4] To do that, David Hornbeck, the Superintendent who was the primary architect of the reform effort, sought to transform the entire District, from schools to central office. Supported by the Annenberg Challenge grant, he argued that the District could raise student achievement and improve teaching and learning by implementing standards and a strong accountability system, empowering schools by moving authority for instructional decisions away from the central office, and building capacity by providing a host of supports for teachers and students. Attaining the goal of improved student achievement meant implementing throughout the District — all at one time — a complex set of reform initiatives designed to work in concert.

[4] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design*. Philadelphia: Author, 1995, p. i.

In our first report on the initiative, we described *Children Achieving's* theory of action this way:

Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing; and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the District's high standards.[5]

Superintendent Hornbeck accepted this description as an accurate statement of his theory of action.[6]

The statement above also reflects, in essence, the prevailing theory of systemic reform.[7] "Systemic reformers" argue that previous attempts at reform have largely failed because they were too incremental, too narrowly framed, and did not attempt to alter the "system" itself. They assert that previous reforms did not institutionalize high expectations for students and teachers and did not fundamentally alter the roles of those in charge of governance and management structures. They conclude that a more comprehensive strategy that sets academic standards, monitors accountability, and coheres policy is necessary.

BELIEFS AND VALUES UNDERLYING THE REFORM

Philadelphia was among the first urban school districts to take a systemic approach to school reform and to test this new theory of school improvement. In addition to systemic theory, outlined in a ten-point plan,[8] *Children Achieving* rested on a particular set of beliefs and values. We found these values articulated in District documents, in speeches made by Superintendent Hornbeck and other leaders, in interviews with School District staff, and in discussions at policy meetings. They included:

Primacy of results. Results are what matter; how they are achieved is less important.

Equity is paramount. The School District must be an advocate for the poor children it serves. Equity — of academic expectations, learning

[5] Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Research for Action, and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, *A first-year evaluation report of Children Achieving: Philadelphia's education reform*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia First, 1996.

[6] Field notes, September 1996.

[7] J. Christman, T. Corcoran, E. Foley, and T. Luhm, "Philadelphia's Children Achieving initiative: The promise and challenge of systemic reform in an urban school district." In W. Boyd (ed.), *Reforming urban school governance: Responses to the crisis of performance*. Westport, CT: Ablex/Greenwood Publishing, in press.

[8] For a detailed description of the *Children Achieving* reform plan, please see our previous reports or School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design*.

opportunities and achievement outcomes — is a paramount objective. All children can learn, and "all" means "all."

School personnel need autonomy to meet the needs of their students. Those working closest to students know what's best for students, and want and need the freedom and authority to act on their decisions. Hence, central authorities should not prescribe the means to achieve the goals lest they inhibit local innovation.

Strong incentives are necessary. To spur action at the "cluster"[9] and school level, strong incentives must be developed. Incentives might include rewards and sanctions for performance as well as rewards and sanctions for adopting particular strategies or behaviors.

Do it all at once. Reform in all aspects of the system must occur simultaneously and immediately to achieve significant results.

These beliefs and values were not equally important nor consistently apparent over the course of the reform. Depending on the central office figure leading the effort, the year, or the goal of the initiative, one core belief might be emphasized over another. Sometimes seemingly conflicting beliefs co-existed. We will return to these beliefs and values throughout this report, demonstrating how they shaped central office policy and reform implementation, the relationship between schools, clusters, and the central office, and the roles of central office leaders.

[9] Clusters were created under *Children Achieving* and are the District's intermediary organizational unit between the central office and the schools. Under *Children Achieving* there were 22 clusters in Philadelphia, each organized around a comprehensive high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it.

POLICY EVOLUTIONS

When David Hornbeck began his job as Superintendent in Philadelphia, he promised to turn the School District "on its head."[10] No longer would the central office dictate to schools. "Those who sit closest to the action are in the best position to decide what mix of resources...will most effectively accomplish the goal of raising student achievement."[11] Schools would be given what Hill, Harvey, and Campbell[12] call "freedom of action" through greater control over their own resources and the ability to make the decisions that would most directly impact students. As noted above, the "commitment to substantial school level autonomy" was a central tenet of *Children Achieving.*[13]

Exactly what this fundamental change in organization meant for the role of the central office was unclear from the beginning. The blueprint for the *Children Achieving* initiative, the Strategic Action Design, stated that the new functions of the central office were to "set standards, assess progress, monitor for equity, and act as a guide and provider of resources and support."[14] But in practice these changes were complex and difficult to achieve, as central office staff tried to negotiate their work amid the new ideas, structures, and policies that made up *Children Achieving* and the sometimes-conflicting roles these functions suggested for them.

SETTING STANDARDS: CENTRALIZED DECENTRALIZATION

One of the first major activities of the central office staff was to create "world-class" content standards for English/language arts, mathematics, science, and the arts. After an eight-month drafting process involving Philadelphia teachers, principals, and community members, the content standards were circulated for widespread review beginning in August 1996. Content standards for social studies, health and physical education, and world languages followed in May 1997. The standards described generally what skills and knowledge students should acquire in each subject and should be able to demonstrate by the end of three benchmark grades: fourth, eighth, and eleventh.

The development of content standards was a departure for a school district that had relied on a Standardized Curriculum for most of the previous decade. Implemented during the administration of Hornbeck's predecessor, Constance Clayton, the Standardized Curriculum specifically delineated what should be taught in every grade, as well as when it should be taught, including a daily pacing schedule. Critics of the Standardized

[10] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design*, p. iv.

[11] Ibid, p. III-11.

[12] P. Hill, J. Harvey, and C. Campbell, *It takes a city*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 49.

[13] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design*, p. III-10

[14] Ibid, p. iv.

Curriculum suggested that it mired teachers in traditional ways of teaching and de-professionalized the vocation of teaching. Sometimes curricula of this type are described as "teacher-proof" because they are intended to limit the ability of individual teachers to determine what is taught. In Philadelphia, there was not widespread resistance to the Standardized Curriculum; on the contrary, many teachers were comfortable with it. But since there was no system for monitoring its implementation, we do not know how extensively it was followed.

Though standards setting was viewed as a centralized function, the move from the Standardized Curriculum to a system of content standards was in practice a de facto form of decentralization. Under the previous administration, the Standardized Curriculum identified both the goals for student learning and the means of getting there. The intent of standards, on the other hand, was to define the goals for schools, while allowing them to choose the means to reach them. Although setting the standards was a centralized function, leaving the curriculum to be defined at the school level was consistent with the central belief in the need for increased school autonomy.

This was the theory expressed in early interviews with central office staff. They said over and over again how important it was to get "decisions down to the schools." They emphasized the role of school staff in making decisions about how best to serve students. "We are not going to mandate how schools are to improve," one central office leader noted. Another said, "Among the enlightened practitioners there is a sense that a lot of the solutions are at the local level. They [schools] should be creative, make decisions about budget, curriculum choice..."[15] The idea was that the central office would set the standards, and schools would figure out how to help students achieve them.

Initially, some central office staffers interpreted the goal of decentralization so literally that almost every action proposed by the central office was a topic of contention. For example, during an October 1996 policy meeting, central office staff and other influential policy leaders debated whether or not efforts should be made to improve the capacity of the central office to offer curriculum expertise to strengthen teachers' understanding and use of the standards. A meeting participant described the dilemma:

There is only one pot of money. And so if you use it to develop the skills of central office staff then you are basically saying to the schools, 'You don't have to use it [central office expertise], but we took your resources to develop it.'[16]

But, not all central office leaders were hesitant to take on capacity-building roles. Other meeting participants argued that it was absolutely necessary for the central office to help schools make decisions. One noted, "Schools need a bridge to the new standards and expectations." Another said, "Local schools should be able to come to the

[15] Field Notes, April 28, 1998.

[16] Field Notes, October 30, 1996.

central office for the expertise to implement the *Children Achieving* reforms." Some supported their position by giving examples of poor decisions made by schools when given authority without guidance. "We waste millions of dollars every year on decentralized textbook purchases. They [the materials schools select] are not standards-based."[17]

These debates about the central office role in curriculum policy continued over the next several months. To some central office leaders, everything seemed up for grabs. A good part of one early policy meeting was devoted to a discussion of the implications of the standards' rhetoric that suggests that student outcomes should not vary, rather the amount of time allotted for students to reach the standards should vary, that is, "time is the variable." In that meeting, policy leaders grappled with such basic issues as whether students should be assigned to grades (e.g., first grade, second grade, third grade, and so on), whether students should be assessed with letter grades (e.g., A, B, C, etc.) at all, and whether any student should be allowed to "fail." One of them said, "If time is truly the variable, a zero doesn't count anymore. It would just be a student taking longer to get where they should be according to the standards."[18] Another said that standards implied a completely ungraded system through which students could move at their own pace.

Two members of the Superintendent's inner circle were leading this meeting, and resisted the conclusion that schools would have to be ungraded and completely eliminate failure. "Take a step back," one of them suggested, "Is this central's decision? If we have standards, assessment, and accountability, then couldn't we have it different in different schools?"[19]

These tensions concerning the roles of schools in making decisions and the role of the central office as a source of guidance were apparent throughout many early discussions. There were debates about whether to develop a core group of consultants for the central office,[20] whether to organize the content standards by grade level,[21] whether to create a district list of standards-based materials for reading and math,[22] whether to provide professional development for testing of culturally and linguistically diverse students,[23] and whether to fund New Standards and portfolio pilot programs.[24] In each of these cases, at least one central office staff member expressed confusion about how they could faithfully implement *Children Achieving* without impinging on schools' autonomy to make their own decisions.

Some of this confusion can be attributed to the central office's limited capacity to serve as leaders of an

[17] Field notes, October 30, 1996.

[18] Field notes, December 12, 1996.

[19] Field notes, December 12, 1996.

[20] Field notes, October 30, 1996.

[21] Field notes, December 11, 1996.

[22] Field notes, March 13, 1997.

[23] Field notes, March 13, 1997.

[24] Field notes, April 17, 1997.

emerging Philadelphia standards movement, a subject we address in more detail later in this report. But it also reflected a lack of clarity about the role of the central office in the reform. *Children Achieving* stated that the central office would make fewer decisions for schools, but that it would act as a "guide and provider of resources and support" — what we call capacity-building. They struggled to figure out how to be both more "hands-off" and more helpful to schools. Several central office leaders felt the capacity-building role conflicted with the core value of school autonomy. They wondered if the central office should play any role in capacity-building, considering the commitment to decentralization and the substantial investment made in clusters, an intermediate organizational unit between the central office and the schools. Other reform leaders, who believed schools would not be able to reform themselves alone, felt that the central office had to play a role in building capacity. There was no consensus, however, about what kind of support and direction that role implied.

NEW AUTONOMY PERCEIVED AS MANDATES BY SCHOOLS

Figuring out the central office's new role was also difficult because the capacity of schools varied. Full decentralization assumes that schools have the know-how and the resources to improve student achievement, but simply lack the opportunity or authority to make the decisions that matter. But, in Philadelphia, this was not always the case, as we observed in an earlier report.[25] As the central office in Philadelphia tried to relinquish control, some school staff experienced their new authority as burdensome. With limited resources and little support, the new responsibilities could be frustrating for school staff. As one teacher told us,

When it comes to implementing the [Children Achieving reform], how can we [implement it] if we have to come up with it on our own? There are too many top-down commands and not enough attention to how the orders would be carried out. They come in and say, 'This is what we want. Do it.' But they don't give you time to learn it or implement it. I wish there was [sic] more support from the administration.[26]

This quote belies the core belief in the need for school autonomy. Few schools and teachers were eager to wrest control over all decision-making and policy from the central office. And even those who were so inclined emphasized how little time they had to devote to the considerable and important tasks of curriculum development and school restructuring.

The quote above also points to one of the ironies of *Children Achieving*. Most of the policies that were implemented as part of *Children Achieving*, especially in the early years of reform, were intended to give schools more autonomy. But, to school personnel these efforts seemed more invasive

[25] J. Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system: How much, what kind, and from where?* Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Research for Action, and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 1998.

[26] Teacher, Spring 1997.

than the more prescriptive, albeit, familiar approaches, such as the Standardized Curriculum. Because the decision to decentralize was made centrally, and designed with little consultation with the field, school and cluster personnel experienced "decentralization" as a set of central mandates. For example, we heard regular complaints about the undue burden of creating and certifying local school councils, an aspect of the reform that was intended to provide teachers and parents more authority over their schools. The development of small learning communities, which served numerous purposes including further decentralization, was also criticized by some school staff as demanding too much of their time and energy.

The creation of clusters — groups of schools made up of a comprehensive high school and its feeder middle and elementary schools — also contributed to the perception of creating mandates. Twenty-two cluster offices were established in Philadelphia, and were expected to mobilize resources, and provide guidance, focus, and professional development. While the central office may have thought of clusters as a form of decentralization, school personnel did not experience them that way. The central office funneled all communication through the clusters and expected the rollout of reforms to be supported primarily by cluster staff. To schools, clusters were simply another layer of bureaucracy that decreased rather than increased school autonomy.[27]

[27] For a full discussion of school personnel's reactions to clusters, please see a companion document that will be published in mid-2001. For the most up-to-date information on this publication, please contact CPRE at (215) 573-0700 or visit our web site: www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL PARTNERS AND WORK TEAMS

School staff were critical of the content standards, saying that the standards and the accompanying Standards Curriculum Resource Guide[28] did not provide them with enough guidance about what to teach. Many pined for the clarity of the Standardized Curriculum.[29] Though several central policymakers, to their credit, recognized this need early in the initiative, there was no consensus about how much guidance to provide or how to provide it.

Two of the School District's primary external partners, the Children Achieving Challenge and the Philadelphia Education Fund, played significant roles in persuading the central office to accept a capacity-building role. Leaders from both groups were members of the Executive Committee and the Superintendent's Cabinet. They also played primary roles in establishing and leading the seven work teams charged with developing goals, setting priorities, and creating

[28] Published soon after the Content Standards were sent out for review, the Standards Curriculum Resource Guides were intended to take the place of the Instructional Planning Guides and Marking Guidelines which teachers had become used to in the Standardized Curriculum. But there was much dissatisfaction with the replacement guides, and many questioned their alignment with the standards (Field notes, December 1996).

[29] For a full discussion of teachers' initial reaction to the release of the content standards, see E. Simon, E. Foley, and C. Passantino, *Making sense of standards*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1998.

annual workplans to implement *Children Achieving*.

In the early stages of the reform effort, many important policy discussions took place in meetings of work teams and work team leaders. During those discussions, external partners pushed central office staff to recognize the need for building capacity in schools and clusters. In an illustrative exchange during one policy meeting, a member of an external partner group challenged a central office leader to think in more complex ways about what it would take to move to a decentralized, standards-based system. They were debating whether to create lists of standards-based materials in reading and math to guide schools in the purchase of textbooks and other curriculum resources. One central office leader felt that the central office simply needed to tell the schools to select materials that were "standards-driven" and then let the schools figure out how to do that. She reflected the core belief in school autonomy when she said that what the central office really needed to do was send a memo from the Superintendent saying that any materials schools select need to be "standards-driven." She asserted that the central office needs to "release the control" and that "schools need to get responsible." She wondered, "why bring this [responsibility] back to the central office?"

An external partner disagreed with the central office leader voicing this opinion. The partner felt that at some point schools might be able to take more responsibility for selecting standards-driven materials, but school staff needed to learn how to be "good consumers" first. It was the central office's responsibility, therefore, to provide schools with guidance and support until the time when schools had developed the capacity to do it on their own. The external partner described this as "trying to deal with the vacuum in between."[30]

Central policymakers found it difficult to navigate the "vacuum" that lay between a fully centralized and a fully decentralized system. To some, a District-led effort to build capacity seemed to be in conflict with the value of school autonomy. If schools were to assume control over their own destinies, could the central office set parameters or legitimately mandate specific actions? What supports could the central office feasibly supply? How strong should signals be about what and how to teach?

GUIDANCE THROUGH STANDARDS

By the end of the 1996-1997 school year, District policy leaders were trying to specify which policies would be mandated centrally and which would be left to the schools and clusters to decide. For example, in a curriculum policy meeting held with the Superintendent, administrators developed a summary statement about the role of the central office. The first two points clarified the central office's role in "standards-driven policy development."

[30] Field Notes, March 3, 1997.

We will mandate standards, graduation requirements, assessments, promotion policy, some reporting elements, [and some] aspects of student responsibility.

Issues of curriculum and instruction (graded vs. non[-graded], core curriculum, intensive scheduling, etc.) will be treated as issues of best practice. This means providing information as to degrees of flexibility, recommending research-based practices, [and] developing curriculum as resources — but not mandating.[31]

The first statement spelled out that the central office would set standards not only for content, but also for performance (e.g., graduation, promotion). The second statement implied a role for the central office as a gentle guide in all other aspects of curriculum policy. Still trying to remain true to the reform's underlying belief that "schools need autonomy," the central office would "provide information," and "recommend" best practices, but not mandate their use. Signals about curriculum from the central office would be suggestions, not policy. The goal was, as one central office leader noted, to "err on the least amount of policy" or mandates, without looking "uncaring or unaware" of the realities and needs of schools.[32]

One of the results of this approach was that the central office engaged in a flurry of standards development, consistent with the standards-setting role initially envisioned in *Children Achieving*. By setting standards of practice for various School District activities, the central office could signal what they believed were the most promising approaches without, they felt, impinging on schools' right to prescribe their own "treatment." Over the next two years, central office personnel created standards of practice for many central, cluster, and school activities, including: classroom practice, testing, professional development, early literacy, culturally and linguistically diverse students' graduation and promotion requirements, school rosters, budgets, small learning communities, central office practice, equity, cluster practice, and the Comprehensive Support Process.[33]

It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to assess the effect of each of these sets of standards or to reach conclusions about whether their impact was positive or negative. It is clear, however, that the strategy of developing guidelines for, rather than mandating, practice was used extensively by central office leaders in their effort to navigate the new roles laid out for them in *Children Achieving*. However, these standards were often perceived by the field as mandates, in part because the standards were often used to evaluate school performance (e.g., in the development of small learning communities). Schools continued to see standards as requirements handed down from above, rather than as opportunities for increased school autonomy.

[31] School District of Philadelphia, *Standards-driven policy development*. Philadelphia: Author, unpublished manuscript, 1997.

[32] Field notes, April 24, 1997.

[33] This is not necessarily an exhaustive list. These are just the sets of standards of which the evaluation team was aware.

TRYING TO FILL THE VACUUM: CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

The process of defining the role of the central office in curriculum policy also led to the publication of more detailed, standards-based curriculum supports. The District began to discuss development of curriculum frameworks as early as December 1996, but it was not until after questions about "standards-driven policy development" were resolved that work on the frameworks began in earnest. School and cluster staff also helped central office leaders to recognize the need for more detailed curriculum supports. Responses from teachers and schools reflected a desire for more specific direction than the content standards and the accompanying "Standards Curriculum Resources" guides and helped persuade the central office to shift their priority from giving schools more freedom of action to offering more guidance and resources. The "Curriculum Frameworks," which debuted in January 1998, were created, in part, because teachers asked for them. One of the leaders in this work explained:

I've never before worked on a document that teachers asked for with the exception of [the Curriculum Frameworks]. Not in 13 years with the District. Teachers wanted the support. The TLN [Teaching and Learning Network, based in the clusters] persuaded the central office staff it was needed. We were persuaded to do it. They needed a bridge between where they are and where we want them to be.[34]

Though he noted that at first he felt the Curriculum Frameworks were antithetical to "what standards-driven instruction is about," he and other central office staff altered their stance because there was "a reality gap." Rather than leaving it up to teachers, schools, and clusters to develop standards-based curricula and teaching methods by themselves, he came to the realization that "we need to build the capacity in schools, among teachers."[35] The Curriculum Frameworks were intended to be just the first step in that regard, though in reality they turned out to be the only published curricular resources offered to all teachers.

The Curriculum Frameworks were designed to answer the question, "What do I need to do to get my students to achieve these standards?" They fleshed out the academic content standards and were organized by grade, defined grade-specific skills and content, and offered suggestions for units and activities that addressed the content standards.

The Curriculum Frameworks refrained from mandating a specific curriculum, but they did identify constructivism as the pedagogical philosophy underlying the District standards. Constructivism emphasizes the student's active engagement in his or her own learning and advocates hands-on instructional approaches. In the overview of the

[34] Field notes, April 27, 1998.

[35] Field notes, April 27, 1998.

Curriculum Frameworks, its authors advocated constructivist practices.[36]

[Earlier curriculum materials] stress skill development through practice, drill, and memorization; the standards stress constructivist learning by understanding and applying knowledge...The ways of teaching and learning reflected in the earlier documents are not appropriate for preparing all students to meet the high standards set forth in the Philadelphia standards.[37]

The publication of the Curriculum Frameworks marked the first instance during the *Children Achieving* reform era when the central office had stated that the Philadelphia standards implied a specific approach to instruction. Until then, the rhetoric from the central office had been that any instructional approach that worked to help students meet the standards was acceptable and appropriate, consistent with the core belief that results, not means, were what mattered. By asserting the desirability of the constructivist approach, the central office made a clear departure from this core belief.

RESPONSE TO THE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

The Curriculum Frameworks were well received by teachers, especially those at the elementary and middle school levels. More than 46 percent of teachers who responded to a teacher survey conducted by CPRE in 1999 felt that the Curriculum Frameworks had helped them change their teaching methods. Still many complained that the guidance offered through the Curriculum Frameworks was not enough. Over half of teachers agreed "somewhat" or "strongly" with the statement that the frameworks were "too vague about the content to be covered to be helpful with my lesson planning." Leaders of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) complained repeatedly that the Curriculum Frameworks did not offer new teachers enough guidance about what to teach, an omission that a PFT representative claimed was contributing to Philadelphia's high teacher attrition rate.[38]

The Curriculum Frameworks advocated a radically different approach to instruction than was the norm in the School District of Philadelphia. The pedagogical approach advocated in the frameworks, constructivism, was neither widely practiced nor widely understood by the city's teachers. As illustrated in an earlier CPRE report,[39] prior to publication of the Curriculum Frameworks, teachers had only a superficial understanding of the

[36] It is important to note that standards are not inherently constructivist, though some advocates of standards advocate this pedagogical approach. Standards could just as easily be linked to more traditional pedagogy.

[37] School District of Philadelphia, *Curriculum frameworks*. Philadelphia: Author, 1998, p. 2. A later, revised version of the Curriculum Frameworks stated the connection between standards and constructivism more strongly: "One of the major theories about teaching and learning on which the standards movement in Philadelphia and elsewhere has been based is constructivism" (School District of Philadelphia web site, http://www.philasch.k12.pa.us/offices/curriculum/frameworks/standriv/index.htm).

[38] Field notes, June 5, 2000.

[39] Simon, Foley, and Passantino, *Making sense of standards*.

implications of content standards for their practice. Typically, they used the standards as checklists, to check off the topics covered. They saw the standards as having relevance for the content of their courses, but not for their teaching practice or for student performance. This was not surprising given how little opportunity teachers had been given to discuss the standards and how little support they received with curricular reviews.

Two years after the standards were adopted, with the publication of the Curriculum Frameworks and more time to absorb what the standards implied for their practice, we found that more teachers were moving toward standards-based instruction. However, the typical teacher's practice was still far from the kind of teaching described in the introduction to the Curriculum Frameworks. In an intensive study of classrooms in 1997-1998, we found that most lessons lacked intellectual rigor, and content difficulty and expectations for students were both low. Some teachers continued to ignore the standards and curriculum frameworks, especially high school teachers. As the central office staff began to understand just how much instruction had to change, they began to consider stronger signals to induce reform.

SEND STRONGER SIGNALS TO ENSURE EQUITY

In addition to capacity-building and setting standards, *Children Achieving* defined two other roles for the central office: monitoring equity and holding School District staff accountable for student achievement. These two functions were combined in the Professional Responsibility Index, the District's primary accountability mechanism, which included measures of both student achievement and equity. Equity and accountability concerns were also addressed through the graduation and promotion supports and requirements and the citywide proficiency exams.[40]

In the following section we describe how the central office's interpretation of these two roles led it to develop stronger and more prescriptive signals to schools about what and how to teach. We also show how equity concerns naturally led to an emphasis on education inputs — such as resources, course content, and teaching quality — that conflicted with the core value that "results are what matter." Finally, we reveal what we believe to be a contradiction inherent in the design of *Children Achieving* and in the theory of systemic reform in general: Well-aligned accountability and assessment systems presume a uniform curriculum. Therefore teachers and schools cannot determine their curriculum autonomously. Systemic reform promises both alignment and autonomy, without acknowledging the trade-offs between the two.

[40] The Comprehensive Support Process (CSP) was also a major equity initiative. For a full explanation of the CSP, please see E. Foley, *Restructuring student support services: Redefining the role of the school district*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1998.

A NOBLE PREOCCUPATION WITH EQUITY

One of the core beliefs underlying the *Children Achieving* reforms was an emphasis on equity, exemplified by the statement we heard over and over again from the Superintendent and other central office leaders: "All children can learn at high levels, and 'all' means 'all.'"[41] The blueprint for the reform asserted that every child would benefit from *Children Achieving* "including those from low-income families, racial and language minorities, students with disabilities, and other populations we have historically failed."[42] There was consistent attention to equity issues in policy meetings, and all new policies were considered in terms of their potential effects on equity. "Everything can be equity," one policy leader told us.[43] Central office staff took a suspicious view of policies adopted by the Philadelphia Board of Education that were perceived as exclusive, such as the reinstitution of admission requirements in some small learning communities and the creation of elite magnet programs, and they were reluctant to implement them.[44]

Many central office staff members felt that this focus on equity was the hallmark of the reform.

If there is a legacy, it will be that all kids are included and that we should have a stake in having all children achieve. That is the real contribution David [Hornbeck] has made...[45]

With the passionate support of the Superintendent himself, the primacy of this core belief never wavered throughout the reform effort and only grew in importance among central office leaders as the reform progressed.

THE LINK BETWEEN EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Monitoring equity and enforcing accountability were highly linked in *Children Achieving*. A key strategy for encouraging school personnel to make the commitment to equity was to develop and implement an accountability policy that would compel schools to pay attention to the achievement of every student. The Professional Responsibility Index, or PRI, was an annual score for every school in the system based on several indicators of performance:

- Student scores on standardized tests of reading, mathematics, and science (Stanford-9 Achievement Test);
- Either the promotion rate (in elementary and middle schools) or the persistence-to-graduation rate (in secondary schools); and
- Teacher and student attendance rates.

[41] For example, field notes, February 19, 1998 and April 1, 1999.

[42] School District of Philadelphia, *Children Achieving strategic action design*, p. I-1.

[43] Field notes, July 3, 1997.

[44] Field notes, April 1, 1998 and May 14, 1998.

[45] Field notes, November 1999.

Every two years, schools were rewarded or sanctioned based on their progress on two accountability goals: (1) meeting or surpassing their PRI growth target and (2) decreasing the average proportion of students scoring at the lowest levels on the three portions of the SAT-9. The latter provision was included to prevent schools from "creaming," that is, only testing their brightest students, and to induce schools to treat all students as having the potential to perform at high levels on the SAT-9. Additionally, an element of the first goal, the growth target, also was intended to promote more equal treatment of students. Schools were awarded points toward their growth target simply for testing students, regardless of the students' actual scores on the test. In the first accountability cycle, some high schools' average achievement actually decreased, but they were able to reach their growth target by including more students in the testing program.

Rewarding schools for testing students had a major impact on inclusion in testing. The proportion of special education and culturally and linguistically diverse students tested increased significantly in the first accountability cycle.[46] While overall achievement improved annually, data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, family income, gender, English language proficiency, and disability showed large gaps, some of which grew over the course of *Children Achieving*.[47] Central office staff reacted emotionally to data that showed certain groups of students falling behind their peers. For example, in 1998, the four-year graduation rate was almost 30 points lower for students in families on welfare (39.9 percent) than for all other students (67.2 percent). The four-year graduation rate for Latino students overall was only 37.1 percent.[48] Fifteen percent fewer eleventh grade African American boys scored at or above basic in reading in 1998 (18.8 percent) than their female, African American counterparts (33.8 percent). More than half of White students (54 percent), on the other hand, scored at or above basic on the reading test that year.[49]

Examining these results in a policy meeting, one central office leader described herself as "heartsick."[50] Another summarized: "Areas of deep concern are for low-income students, as well as Latino and African American students, especially those who are male and especially at higher levels of schooling."[51]

In order to hold schools accountable for results, the School District needed to measure results, but measurement spotlighted the alarming inequity of outcomes across the District. This noble preoccupation with equitable outcomes naturally led central office leaders to question the equity of inputs, even though as one high-level staff member put it, "focuses on inputs are not in

[46] D. Hornbeck and G. Ingram, *Policy 102 progress and plans: December 15, 1998*. Philadelphia: School District of Philadelphia, 1998.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid, p. 8.

[49] Ibid, p. 11.

[50] Field notes, April 1, 1999.

[51] Ibid.

sync with a standards-driven system."[52] "Focusing on inputs," that is determining which student populations were receiving which resources and supports, conflicted with the core value, expressed in the blueprint for the *Children Achieving* reform, that results are what matter. "Input" issues that arose over the course of the reform included: the differences in per-pupil funding between Philadelphia and its surrounding districts, the quality of teaching, the lack of uniformity in course content, the effects of uncertified teachers on student achievement, student access to elite small learning communities and magnet programs, and the distribution of programs for gifted and talented students, among others. The low achievement of English language learners and minority, low-income, and disabled students, and the slow pace of change, also served as pressures on central office leaders to develop stronger signals to schools about what and how to teach.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OPPORTUNITY-TO-LEARN AND PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

The connection between equity and accountability was also apparent as central office staff began to think about ways to address student accountability for achievement. District leaders saw a strong connection between students' accountability for their academic performance and the "inputs" discussed above, which were termed "fair opportunities to learn." While they lamented some school staff members' low expectations of students, particularly of students in historically underserved groups, they also recognized a need to encourage students to make efforts to achieve at high levels. A central office leader told us, "Now that school-level accountability has been instituted, we have to balance that with student-level accountability."[53]

When the PRI was first implemented, schools became accountable for student achievement, but there was no district policy incentive to encourage students to do their best on the tests, to work hard in school, or to take their own education seriously. However, neither the central office staff nor the Board of Education members felt that implementation of student accountability was possible without a concerted effort to provide students with the necessary supports for success. Without these supports — high-quality instruction, opportunities for remediation, access to summer school, and rich learning resources — students could not be justifiably held to performance standards in their view.

The graduation and promotion supports and requirements along with the citywide proficiency examinations were expected to be the School District's primary methods for finding that balance. Opportunity-to-Learn standards were envisioned in the initial blueprint for the *Children Achieving* reform but were never fully developed. The Graduation and Promotion Supports and Requirements, adopted in June 1998, did articulate some of the

[52] Field notes, February 18, 1998.

[53] Field notes, November 1999.

supports to which students were entitled, and one District leader consistently referred to these as "one kind of opportunity-to-learn standards."[54]

The Graduation and Promotion Supports and Requirements were scheduled to take effect beginning in the 1999-2000 school year.[55] This ambitious and extensive set of policies included descriptions of the "interlocking commitment needed from key parties to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn," the "instructional supports necessary to raise achievement levels," and the new requirements for admission to grades 5 and 9 and for graduation. The Board adopted the new policies on the condition that the graduation and promotion requirements, such as passing all major courses, would be enforced only if the supports were available, such as increased instructional time for at-risk students.

CITYWIDE PROFICIENCY EXAMS

Included in the graduation and promotion requirements was a provision for developing citywide proficiency exams for grades 7 through 12 in all major subjects. To be promoted from eighth grade and to graduate, the new policies required that students pass all their major courses, as well as the SAT-9 or the proficiency exam. Additionally, scores on the proficiency tests would be calculated into the final grade of all students in grades 7-12. By spring 2000, proficiency exams had been developed and piloted in English I and II, algebra I and II, geometry, integrated math I, living environment I, and physical science I and II. Development of assessments in social studies, as well as in all subjects in other grades, would be developed over the next several years, but their future is in doubt under the post-Hornbeck administration.

Central office leaders greatly anticipated the development and implementation of the proficiency exams. Less than a year after the development of the Curriculum Frameworks, they looked to the proficiency exams to provide stronger incentives to signal to teachers what, and how, to teach. Increasingly less concerned with the need to give school personnel freedom to make curricular decisions, central office leaders developed these more prescriptive approaches in the name of equity. Again, this highlighted a conflict between two of the reform's core values: the need for strong incentives and the emphasis on school autonomy. And again, school autonomy lost. During one policy meeting where central office leaders discussed the need to increase the rigor and similarity of course content across the District, one individual explained to the group how the proficiency exams would take precedence over the Curriculum Frameworks in identifying curriculum content for teachers. "[The citywide] finals will determine what's in the Algebra courses. And what's in the other subjects will be determined by

[54] Field notes, May 14, 1998 and December 3, 1998.

[55] Due to funding limitations, only the requirements for entrance to fifth grade were enforced in June 2000.

the finals as well."[56] In an interview in December 1998, a central office leader described the citywide finals as, "the tail that wags the dog. When we publish the scope and sequence, they [teachers] will finally know what they have to teach..." During the meetings we observed, there was no discussion about the influence of the tests on pedagogy. It seemed to be assumed that the tests would drive the kind of instruction — constructivism — that district leaders supported. It is important to note that proficiency exams were for middle schools and high schools only, the two school levels at which *Children Achieving* had the least success.[57]

Central office leaders believed that the addition of penalties and rewards for student performance on the proficiency exams would make them harder for teachers to ignore.[58] Developed in collaboration with the American Institutes for Research, the proficiency exams were based on the Curriculum Frameworks, but more detailed than the frameworks. The specifications weren't available until October 1999, but by that time, central policymakers seemed to have accepted the premise that these new examinations would serve as incentives for teachers, clearly signaling to them what to teach. This exchange between a CPRE interviewer and a School District leader illustrates the point:

CPRE: In the ideal, what should teachers consider when they decide what to teach?

SDP: In the ideal? [They should consider] the standards and we have benchmarks at grades 4, 8, and 11. They should refer to our frameworks and our content standards.

CPRE: What incentives exist for them to do that?

SDP: The development of the proficiency exams. The exams are built around the frameworks. They need to use those resources if they want their kids to do well on the exams. The work comes directly from the frameworks. This year will set the tone...

We have the test specs that come from the Curriculum Frameworks. The proficiency exams will come from the test specs. And teachers will figure out the things that they are not covering, that they are not teaching. Also, people will figure out you can't offer sports math and do well on an algebra exam; so it will [end up] redesigning courses of study.

[56] Field notes, December 3, 1998.

[57] For a description of the impact of reform on schools, please see a companion document that will be published in mid-2001. For the most up-to-date information on this publication, please contact CPRE at (215) 573-0700 or visit our web site: www.gse.upenn.edu/cpre/.

[58] Due primarily to logistical problems and funding uncertainties, the citywide finals were not used as part of the School District's graduation and promotion requirements. That is, finals were not calculated into a student's grade or used for promotion or graduation decisions.

CPRE: So you really see these exams as a driver of instruction?

SDP: We're designing them that way.[59]

With this prescriptive approach — using the proficiency exams to delineate course content and instruction — the central office made a dramatic shift from the early emphasis on school autonomy. This shift, however, was consistent with the pressures, and perhaps the flaws, of systemic reform. A well-aligned accountability and assessment system demands a uniform curriculum and the development of proficiency exams was simply another step in that direction. The exams were clearly intended to drive instruction, making any assertion false that said schools could determine the means to get results for which they were being held accountable.

EXPLAINING THE SHIFT AWAY FROM SCHOOL AUTONOMY

The shift in the central office role from a focus on decentralization to more prescriptive approaches was partly a result of frustration with the slow pace of change. Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner[60] identify an emphasis on top-down mandates as a common (but ineffective) response to low student performance and persistent inconsistencies from classroom to classroom. Looking back on the implementation of *Children Achieving*, several central office staff told us that they had relied too much on decentralization in the beginning. As one told us, when *Children Achieving* began she had been in favor of:

Pushing money down to schools. In theory this is what we should do. But I don't think it's worked....Some schools are doing OK. But I go in plenty of schools where the principals don't even know all of their funding sources. I think we do need to tie money to outcomes in a way. We need to be more prescriptive about what schools do with money when they're not performing.[61]

Another central office leader indicated that the early focus on decentralization had led to confusion in the field. He also concluded that central needed to make decisions with more certainty.

We were very ambivalent about the balance between central and local decision-making — it caused a lot of confusion. There was too much emphasis on school-based decision-making at the beginning. We need strong central decision-making.[62]

Central office staff felt that decentralization placed too much of a burden on schools, and that many schools weren't ready to take more responsibility for the work of reform. In the absence of school time, interest, and/or capacity to make curricular

[59] Field notes, November 1999.

[60] P. Senge, N. Cambron-McCabe, T. Lucas, B. Smith, J. Dutton, and A. Kleiner, *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about public education*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

[61] Field notes, March 2000.

[62] Field notes, November 1999.

decisions, central office should fill the void.

The theory is that eventually schools should be able to do all these things for themselves. But, is that practical without more help in the schools? If schools got more help, maybe, but we can't afford it. I don't see how. Somebody has got to do this work. If we [central office personnel] don't, who's going to do it?[63]

The accountability system in particular placed considerable pressure on the whole district to improve, especially when combined with the core belief in "doing it all at once." As the PRI growth targets became harder to reach without significant improvements in student achievement, concerns rose about how to compel school personnel to engage in reforming their practice. Schools could eke only so much "growth" from the PRI's non-testing elements. Promotion rates and student and staff attendance rates were already high in most elementary and middle schools, persistence rates were not very malleable, and after an initial explosion in the proportion of students tested, increases in that area leveled off as well. Some central office leaders felt that unless school personnel were forced to improve curriculum and instruction, the credibility of the entire reform was in jeopardy. This excerpt from our field notes describes one leader's concerns.

'The further along we go without paying enough attention to curriculum and instruction, more and more schools are not going to meet their [accountability] targets.' He feels that this will undermine the accountability system, as the goals set for progress become 'unrealistic.' 'The goals must be attainable and staff must feel that the incentive system has integrity and is reasonable.'[64]

Central office leaders became convinced that more prescriptive approaches were necessary. As one of them told us, "If we keep pushing accountability without pushing curriculum and instruction, we could bring the system down."

REFORM OVERLOAD: THE EFFECT OF "DOING IT ALL AT ONCE"

Another factor that played a part in the evolution of the central office role over the course of *Children Achieving* was the pressure of the core belief that the whole system must be reformed simultaneously and immediately. "Doing it all at once" created reform overload throughout the School District, from schools to the central office. It was a strong contributor to school staff's inability to focus their efforts around clearly defined and manageable instructional priorities. Cluster staff worked hard to win teacher support and to assist them, but they were hampered by the sheer number of District initiatives and directives that they had to implement. Many clusters were unable to fully develop or implement their own reform strategies because so much time was spent promoting and disseminating

[63] Field notes, April 1997.

[64] Field notes, November 4, 1999.

information about new central office policies and programs that the schools were required to implement.

Some central office staff, particularly those who were not among the Superintendent's close advisers, were also overwhelmed by the volume of reform initiatives. This concern was evident very early in the *Children Achieving* initiative. In an early policy meeting, when several of the Superintendent's inner circle had left the room, one central office leader said "We need to talk about priorities and make some tough, hurtful choices and let the chips fall where they may. We can't pretend anymore that we can do it all." Another central office leader agreed using the analogy that "We can't plow all the streets. Which ones are most important?" He suggested that focus should be placed on a group of schools or a few clusters.[65] But when the inner circle members returned and the other participants briefed them on what happened in their absence, there was no mention of the concern about reform overload.

This reluctance to tell the Superintendent and his closest staff about the difficulty of "doing it all at once" continued throughout the reform effort. In an interview two years after the exchange quoted above, a District leader told us:

I've got to tell you something else. We are on innovation overload! As hard as it is for a Superintendent in a large district, someone has to have the guts to say it...Everyone is tired...[Central office personnel] are having to learn something new all the time, we're rolling out so many competing forces. [Begins counting on his fingers.] We have the CSP. We have SLC. We have School-to-Career. We have service learning. We have multidisciplinary projects. And there is more to come. That is just one hand! We have judgments against us in federal courts that push us to make things not fall through the cracks...There's always a new priority.[66]

The urgency of "doing it all at once" created pressure on central office staff simply to "roll out" the reforms and move on to the next priority. There was little time to support or guide the reforms or to receive feedback from the field and review and revise policy. It is not surprising that, to schools and clusters, central office policy felt like unsupported mandates. The core value of "doing it all at once" increased the top-down mandates by the central office, conflicting with the core value of school autonomy.

SUMMARY OF CORE VALUES' EFFECT ON CENTRAL OFFICE ROLE

Figure 1 summarizes the effects of the core values and the four roles of the central office outlined in *Children Achieving* — standards setting, capacity-building, holding schools accountable, and monitoring equity — on School District policy. It shows how the values of school autonomy, the need for incentives and the primacy of results initially led the central office

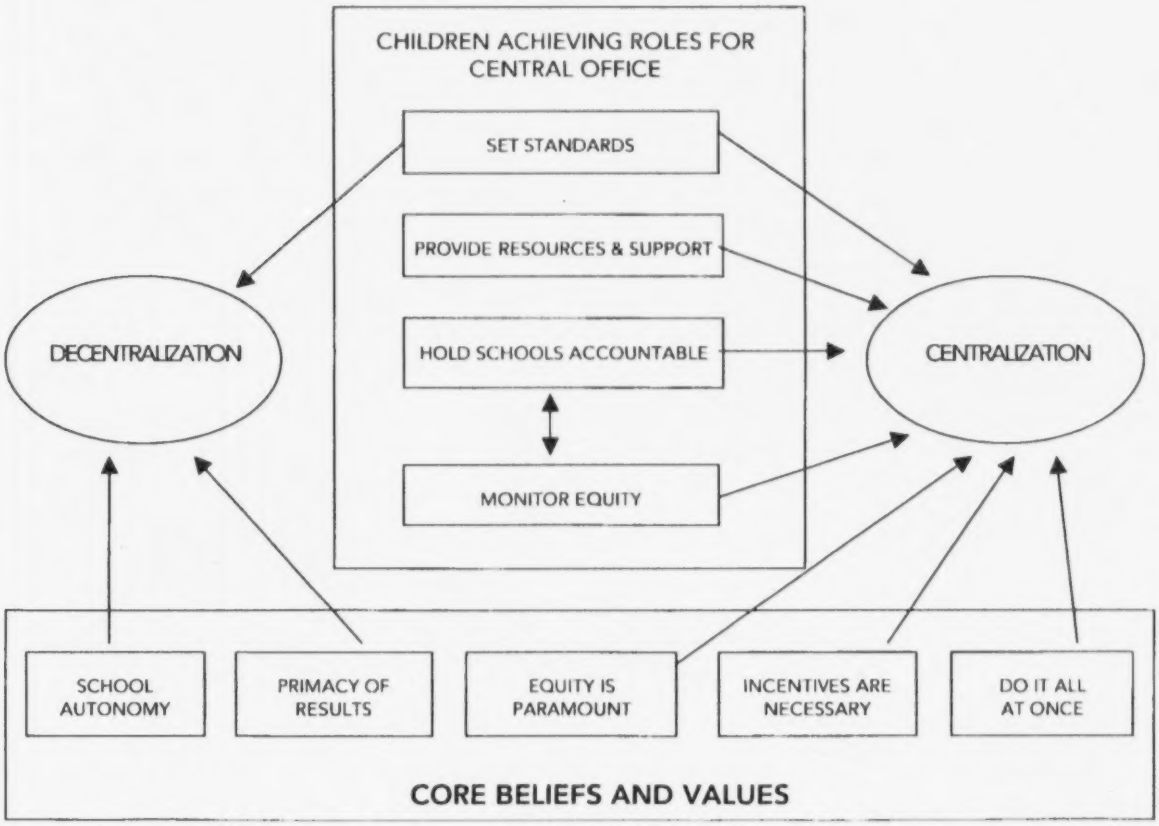
[65] Field notes, November 1996.

[66] Field notes, December 1998.

toward decentralization and the avoidance of mandates. But, equity concerns and the need to reform the system simultaneously and immediately pushed the central office in the opposite direction, toward more prescription.

In the next section of the report, we examine the capacity of the central office and the contextual and implementation issues that help explain this shift away from school autonomy.

FIGURE 1. DIAGRAM OF CORE BELIEFS AND VALUES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA



THE CAPACITY OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING

After several years of reform, central office leaders believed that taking a more prescriptive approach than was initially envisioned in *Children Achieving* was their only recourse for improving instruction. But, the direction in which central office leaders chose to take *Children Achieving* was also influenced by the central office's capacity to support the reforms and their perceptions of school capacities. In this section, we focus on the financial resources, human capital, and social capital of the central office, and describe how serious limitations in those areas led to missteps in implementation. We also discuss the effects of contextual issues on the implementation of the reform, and their impact, in turn on the capacity of the central office.

THE CAPACITY OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE

Spillane and Thompson[67] present a three-part definition of the capacity of school districts. The three elements of capacity they identify include:

- Financial resources allocated to staffing, time, and materials;
- Human capital, or the commitment, disposition and knowledge of district staff; and
- Social capital, or the relationships among school district staff that create (or hinder the creation) of positive group norms, such as collaboration, trust, etc.

We begin by discussing the School District's financial resources.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Philadelphia is not a wealthy city. Due to a drastic decline in the number of jobs available, White/middle class flight from the city, and a changing economy, Philadelphia's population decreased dramatically from the 1970's to the 1980's, and so did its middle class tax base. During that decade, the total population of the five largest U.S. cities — Philadelphia among them — decreased by nine percent, while the population living in poverty grew by 22 percent.[68] When David Hornbeck began his tenure as Superintendent, the city was still recovering from a serious fiscal crisis in which it was forced to borrow $150 million from its employee pension

[67] J.P. Spillane and C.L. Thompson, "Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity: The local education agency's capacity for ambitious instructional reform." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19 (1997), pp. 185-203.

[68] W.J. Wilson, *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 46.

fund just to stay afloat. And with its credit severely damaged, the city had to pay more than $5 million to obtain the loan, a fee equivalent to a 24 percent interest rate.[69]

With that history as a backdrop, the city refused to provide significant additional resources for *Children Achieving*, arguing that it had "stretched its taxing ability to the limit."[70] But the full implementation of *Children Achieving* required significant additional funding, more than the $30 million generated annually by the grant,[71] and its design assumed that more funding would be forthcoming. Launching the initiative was a calculated risk that the Annenberg Challenge grant could be used to improve performance, and that improved performance would generate the political will to obtain increased funding either through the city, the courts, or the legislature. By 1997, the Superintendent, the Board of Education, the City Council, and the Mayor all agreed that it was the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that was not upholding its fair share of the costs of educating Philadelphia's students.

But, state officials did not see it that way.[72] They believed that funds were being used inefficiently in Philadelphia and that the District's teacher contract was a major obstacle to improvement. In their view better management and a better contract were prerequisites for additional state funds. The state did provide Philadelphia with some one-time grants in addition to the funding from the formula, but these were small in comparison to what the School District said it required to support the *Children Achieving* reform agenda. The School District and the city used many strategies to induce the state to provide additional funding — multiple lawsuits, brinksmanship, public scolding — to no avail. Fiscal crises became one of the few constants of the *Children Achieving* reform era.

Without new financing from the state, per pupil funding in Philadelphia was well below what was spent in its surrounding areas. In 1997, Philadelphia spent $6,812 on each public school child. Compared to wealthy suburban school districts such as Jenkintown, Lower Merion, and Radnor, the gap was as much as $5,443 per student.[73] Teacher salaries were also higher in

[69] M. de Courcy Hinds, "A $150 million loan buys Philadelphia some time," *The New York Times* (1991, January 6), p. 14.

[70] School District of Philadelphia, *Realities converge, revisited: School district sees gains on test scores and management efficiencies, but fiscal crisis is at hand*. Philadelphia: Author, 1998, p. 26.

[71] Though a significant source of discretionary funds, the $30 million from the Annenberg Challenge grant was equal to only about two percent of the $1.5 billion annual budget.

[72] The funding that Pennsylvania provides to each school district currently is based on a funding formula which takes into account the number of pupils, the special needs of the district, its ability to raise local taxes, and other factors. However, the state froze the formula in 1993, which meant that state aid to the District did not rise in response to increases in enrollment and poverty in Philadelphia. In actual dollars on a per-pupil basis adjusted for inflation, the real value of state education funds coming to Philadelphia annually between 1993 and 1998 actually decreased by 5.9 percent. (See J. Century, *A citizen's guide to the Philadelphia school budget*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia First, 1998.)

[73] School District of Philadelphia, *Realities converge, revisited*, p. 11.

suburban areas. Starting salaries in the suburbs were more than $3,500 higher than starting salaries in Philadelphia and maximum salaries were more than $9,000 higher.[74] Average teacher salaries in Philadelphia also fall below statewide teacher salary averages.

According to the School District, expenditures on administration were also declining, but they counted the cost of the Teaching and Learning Network (TLN), professional development specialists based at the cluster, as an instructional expense. Critics who counted the TLN among "administrative" costs contended that expenditures on administration actually grew over the course of *Children Achieving*.[75] Whether administrative costs grew or not, there was no doubt that the number of staff assigned to the central office was smaller at the end of the reform than it was before it. To close a budget deficit, over 350 administrative jobs were cut in fiscal year 1997.[76] One district leader told us that his staff of nine had been a staff of nearly 300 a decade earlier.[77]

The School District was definitely a system of scarce resources. This scarcity limited the School District's ability to provide time for teachers and other District personnel to receive professional development, to develop curriculum, and to work with colleagues. It also hampered the District's ability to compete to hire the most qualified personnel. Teachers, in particular, had to make a real commitment to urban education (or find themselves unable to obtain a job in a wealthy suburb) to justify the lower starting salary, which was further reduced by the city tax on wages. Scarce resources also limited the ability of the School District to provide up-to-date curriculum materials and technology. For example, a major effort to wire every school for computer networking and Internet access was delayed when the District discovered that, although it could pay for installation, it did not have enough money to operate the networks. And budget hearings in both 1996 and in 1999 revolved around parent and student testimony that textbooks in the schools were inadequate and out of date.

HUMAN CAPITAL

The capacity of the central office to support the *Children Achieving* reforms was an issue not only of financial resources, but also of human capital. With the exception of a few key leaders, knowledge about the substance of the reforms and the expertise to implement them was generally limited, even in the central office. While many central office staff members were passionately committed to *Children Achieving*, some had only a superficial understanding of the reforms they were supposed to help schools implement. And much of what they

[74] Ibid, p. 29.

[75] See, for example: S. Snyder, "No cash crisis in schools: Philadelphia's problem is management, says an accounting firm hired by the state legislature." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (1998, November 13). T. Kirsch, "President's message: We are fighting back — Together and we've got to win!" *PFT Reporter*. http://www.pft.org/pres798.html.

[76] School District of Philadelphia, *Realities converge, revisited*, p. 27.

[77] Field notes, January 28, 1997.

were trying to implement existed only in theory prior to *Children Achieving*.

At the outset of *Children Achieving*, systemic reform was a fairly new concept nationally and few anticipated the demands it would place on teachers and schools. In Philadelphia, very little attention was paid to the professional development of central office staff. This was clear when, in autumn 1996, some central office leaders were still questioning whether standards were curriculum.[78] Most of the Superintendent's inner circle was knowledgeable and thoughtful about standards-based, systemic reform, but many other staff at the central office did not have a clear understanding of these areas. As one member of the Superintendent's inner circle put it, using the SAT-9 assessment categories to rate the capacity of the central office,

The capacity is 'basic to below basic.' The primary reason for this is [central office personnel] never have spent the considerable amount of time it takes with people at the cluster level and school level to evolve a shared understanding of what change is about. For example, they have spent time developing standards without time spent with folks discussing instructional approaches. Each individual has been left to invent this, and so there is an unevenness with what people have developed and sometimes there is also inconsistency.[79]

Another told us:

I looked at schools and clusters and despite their best efforts, they needed a boost — direct, hands-on intervention, and I found that we didn't have the capacity to do that.[80]

Limited knowledge was just one explanation for this inability to provide "direct, hands-on intervention." Other human capital issues affected central office capacity. Budget cuts resulting from the tight financial resources of the School District, as well as the shift to the cluster structure, had decreased the number of staff in the central office, so there were fewer people available to do more, and increasingly demanding, work. The focus on the *Children Achieving* core value of "doing it all at once" also tied up central office staff in an endless rollout of initiatives, as described earlier.

Poor personnel decisions and turnover in staff also limited central office capacity. The Associate Superintendent in charge of the initial development of the reform and the leader of the Superintendent's transition team resigned in protest over the Superintendent's insistence on promoting teacher accountability. A well-regarded central office leader was demoted for refusing to submit a resignation letter early in the reform. A deputy superintendent retired. Over the course of the reform, there were three different leaders of the Office of Leadership and Learning, four directors of Information Technology (including two acting directors), three directors of the Office of Best Practices, three

[78] Field notes, November 12, 1996.

[79] Field notes, April 1997.

[80] Field notes, November 1998.

Managing Directors, and two directors of the Office of Curriculum Support. Additionally, in late 1998, two key leaders of external partner groups left Philadelphia to pursue new positions elsewhere, further isolating the School District from key constituencies. Their replacements maintained relationships with the central office, but they were not as close to the Superintendent and their presence was not as strong.

Staffing turnover and ineffective leadership over the course of the reform plagued the departments most directly responsible for providing support to the field — the Office of Leadership and Learning, the Office of Curriculum Support, and the Office of Best Practices. Staff hired to fill these vacancies were not, in general, compatible with other members of the leadership group and some gained reputations as "stallers" — people who put up obstacles to reform.[81] One central office leader admitted, "Central office personnel decisions have not been good ones."[82]

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is a product of relationships among people. For example, a group of people that trusts each other has a form of social capital. All other things being equal, a trusting group is more likely to succeed at a given task than a group whose members do not trust each other.[83] In this section, we describe some challenges to the development of social capital in the School District of Philadelphia. We focus on the culture of the District and its history of reliance on line authority and the relationship of the central administration with its potential partners.

LINE AUTHORITY

Establishing and respecting line authority — a system where power and influence were defined by the number of staff one controlled — was a strong cultural norm in the administration of Hornbeck's predecessor, Constance Clayton. The goal of *Children Achieving* to foster local control and "turn the School District on its head," was a direct challenge to that long-held and strongly-embedded belief. The selection of the Superintendent himself, who was educated as both a lawyer and a minister, but not as an educator, was the first in a series of decisions that flouted this hierarchical system.

Initially, the "new" central office was simply layered over the old, creating two parallel worlds, the reform world and the old world. This concern became apparent as work teams, established to design, plan, and implement *Children Achieving*, found their plans frustrated by the "stallers" in key support departments, such as finance, information technology, and transportation.[84] One central office leader noted that "the other offices do not get reflected in the workplans or the goals or," his colleague finished his sentence, "in change. It benefits them to be left out." While at first there was

[81] Field notes, July 3, 1997.

[82] Field notes, November 1999.

[83] Spillane and Thompson, "Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity."

[84] Field notes, July 3, 1997.

some reluctance to try to integrate *Children Achieving* into the fabric of District operations, the District's reform leaders concluded that they must try. As one meeting participant noted, "It's a big task, but it's essential. When we do not do that, one part of the system is doing *Children Achieving* and one is doing standard work."[85] Eventually, with the help of external partners, the central office succeeded in integrating *Children Achieving* into the goals and operating budget of the whole School District, but not until halfway through the reform effort.

The importance of line authority continued to assert itself throughout the reform, however. Initially, cluster leaders were envisioned as "critical friends" for principals, and so were not required to have the authority to rate principals in annual evaluations. But, cluster leaders who lacked rating authority found that many principals ignored them. They clamored for a superintendency certificate so they would be the line officer for principals and could have some kind of influence in the schools in their clusters. By spring 1997, all cluster leaders were given line authority over the principals in their cluster.

RELATIONS WITH POTENTIAL PARTNERS

The development of social capital in the School District was also affected by the central administration's relationships with potential partners, including the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, its own cluster leaders, state officials, and the business community.

[85] Field notes, May 8, 1997.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

The School District's relationship with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) suffered over the course of *Children Achieving* and was characterized by mistrust on both sides. In a sense, the School District administration was at war with its own teachers. The PFT strongly objected to key components of *Children Achieving*, particularly to its accountability provisions. They objected to spending money on cluster staff when they felt schools were understaffed. Leadership of the PFT felt that *Children Achieving* was a threat to the union and to hard-won work rules outlined in the teacher contract. Tensions were highest when the School District administration attempted to reconstitute two high schools, plans which were ultimately halted by an independent arbitrator who ruled that the District had failed to engage in the necessary consultation with the PFT. To PFT representatives, the reconstitution attempt was just one example of the Hornbeck administration's pattern of excluding the PFT from the decision-making process.

School District leaders, for their part, told us that the PFT representatives were invited to meetings about relevant policy areas, but they either obstructed the meetings they attended or never showed up. Central office leaders felt that the PFT leadership was adversarial and unreasonably attached to the unproductive rules and regulations of an antiquated contract, and that the PFT had the interests of teachers, not children, at heart. In our estimation,

both groups behaved badly. In four years of meeting with and interviewing central office staff and PFT representatives, we did not hear a single positive comment from either group about the other.

The acrimony evident on both sides of this relationship made progress difficult. The School District and the PFT were unable to agree on contractual changes that would have supported *Children Achieving*, especially in the area of decentralization. School communities could not select their own principals and staff, as *Children Achieving* advocated, and there was conflicting language about local school councils in the *Children Achieving* plan and the PFT contract.[86] Additionally, the failure of the School District to gain concessions from the PFT undermined its credibility with a number of stakeholders, particularly with principals and the business community.

Cluster Personnel

In addition to an antagonistic relationship with the leadership of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the School District also often alienated its own cluster leaders, who were crucial to reform implementation. Cluster leaders were, for lack of a better term, regional superintendents, who under *Children Achieving's* new organizational structure, were supposed to improve and align instruction across a feeder pattern of schools and lead and support local professional development and community engagement efforts. Cluster leaders were members of the Superintendent's cabinet, which also included key central office leaders.

With the addition of 22 cluster leaders (rather than the six regional superintendents), the Cabinet ended up being a large group of about 50 people, a size that was ill-suited for collaborative work. Cluster leaders came to describe Cabinet meetings as the place they came to talk about decisions that were already made by central office staff. Cabinet meetings were also one of the few forums they had to air their grievances: Central office staff often felt "ganged up on" by cluster leaders.[87] For example, one Cabinet meeting was particularly contentious. Cluster leaders were upset that more information was not available as to how they would finance and organize summer school programs, scheduled to begin about three months from the time of the meeting. They made little effort to hide their anger and hostility from researchers present at the meeting.[88]

This tension arose in part because of conflicting ideas about the cluster role. Whereas central office staff used clusters primarily as vehicles for informing the field about new aspects of the reform, many cluster leaders saw their role differently. They resented

[86] The language of *Children Achieving* called for 35 percent of households to vote to determine council membership; in the teachers' contract the provision was for five parents to be selected by the Home and School Association. Additionally, *Children Achieving* called for two-year terms for parents, while the contract outlined one-year terms for teachers. See Christman, *Guidance for school improvement in a decentralizing system.*

[87] Personal communication, December 2000.

[88] Field notes, March 24, 1999.

what they perceived as central office's intrusion on their work agendas. In the following excerpt from our field notes, a cluster leader illustrates this point:

Part of the challenge I have had as a cluster leader is to keep the central office away from me, so I can allow my people to develop their responsibilities. Downtown keeps adding more [stuff] to our plate...Let me give you an example. The central office wanted to change the special ed formula, which apparently they had been working on for months, but it wasn't shared with anyone [in the field]. When it was finally announced, parents went to the Board and begged them not to let it happen. So the Board then asked the school district what facts they have to support the change, so now ***we*** *[cluster staff] have to do a lengthy survey. We have to identify one special ed kid per special ed classroom and review their [education plan], observe their classroom, interview the parent and teacher, and we have to do it all in four weeks. That's 75 kids for me because we have 75 special ed classrooms. The central office knew that they would ask us to do this in the summer, but they didn't actually ask us until a couple of weeks ago. This says to me that I have to put a hold on everything else I'm doing and do this. It takes away from your focus.*[89]

This unproductive dynamic endured even when central office staff were aware of time and turf concerns and made efforts to seek cluster leader input and plan with respect to cluster schedules. In the 1999-2000 school year, the Superintendent asked the cluster leaders to support him in a fight for fair funding from the state and they refused.

State Officials and the Business Community

The School District's relationship with state education officials, the Governor, and the state legislature also was strained over the course of the reform. When Hornbeck became Superintendent in 1994, there was a Democratic Governor and Democratic majorities in both houses of the state legislature. He came to his position with strong backing from both Philadelphia's mayor and its business community. However, just three months into his administration, the political landscape in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia changed dramatically: the state elected a Republican governor, Tom Ridge, and Republican majorities in the state legislature who were committed to reducing government spending. Relationships between the state officials and the District were tested by the new governor's advocacy of vouchers, his refusal to grant the School District significant additional funds, and the Superintendent's inflammatory response: allegations of racism on the part of state officials via a federal civil rights lawsuit against the state. When we interviewed state education department officials in the fall of 1999, their anger toward David Hornbeck was evident.

This antagonistic relationship between the state and the School District had effects on local constituencies, as well. The strong backing of the business community deteriorated as Hornbeck's battles with the state and its pro-

[89] Field notes, April 1996.

business agenda became more public. The clearest sign of the fracture in the alliance between the business community and the School District was when Greater Philadelphia First — a coalition of Philadelphia business executives that served as the fiscal agent for the Annenberg Challenge — supported Governor Ridge's plan for school vouchers.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The central office's limited capacity naturally had enormous implications for the implementation of the reform effort and contributed to their retreat from decentralization. We discuss below two major implementation issues — poor sequencing of the reforms and underestimation of the time and support needed to implement the reforms — that were both a result of and contributed to the central office's limited capacity to support *Children Achieving*. Table 1, the Reform Implementation Timeline, is included below to provide a brief guide to the timing of major reform initiatives and contextual events.

SEQUENCING AND ROLLOUT OF THE REFORMS

One of the primary implementation flaws of *Children Achieving* was the sequence in which the District rolled out the reforms and supports. In order to capitalize on the momentum built up from the hiring of the new Superintendent and the acquisition of the Annenberg funds and to fulfill the underlying belief to "do it all at once," there was a rush to implementation. Another underlying belief, that "strong incentives are necessary" to induce people to adopt good practices, contributed to a full court press to develop the accountability system. After clusters, the accountability system was the first major component of reform to be implemented, with baseline scores appearing in 1996.

But to many, instituting accountability policies before developing the infrastructure to support achievement was putting the cart in front of the horse. School personnel complained that they were being held accountable for performance targets before teachers had received the new standards, and before all 22 clusters were in place, and long before the development of the Curriculum Frameworks offered a modicum of guidance and summer institutes offered teachers rich opportunities to examine their practice. All of this contributed to perceptions by teachers and principals that they were being asked to carry disproportionate amounts of the burden for improvement. They felt victimized by the ways in which the reforms were presented and rolled out.

TABLE 1. REFORM IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE OF EVENTS: CHILDREN ACHIEVING AND THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

August 1994	David Hornbeck begins his tenure as Superintendent.
June 1995	Annenberg Challenge grant awarded to School District.
August 1995	First six clusters formally established.
December 1995	Standards writing teams convened.
April-May 1996	SAT-9 administered district-wide in grades 2, 4, 6, 8, and 11.
July 1996	Summer institute (four-day professional development program) conducted for teams of teachers on standards-based instruction.
August 1996	Draft standards distributed to all teachers for review.
September 1996	16 other clusters established. Standards Curriculum Resource Guides distributed to teachers.
October 1996	School district forecasts $104 million budget shortfall for 1997-1998 school year.
December 1996	Standards in reading/English/language arts, science, mathematics, and the Arts officially adopted by Board.
February 1997	Announcement of plans to reconstitute two high schools. Superintendent, Board President, City Council President, and Mayor publicly blame state funding formula for financial problems in Philadelphia schools; "Draw a line in the sand" pledging no further cuts in school-based programs; and file a lawsuit alleging that the state had failed to meet its constitutional obligation to provide a thorough and efficient education.
Spring 1997	Cluster leaders given line authority over the principals in their cluster.
May 1997	City Council adopts budget that assumes significant **new** state contribution. Draft standards in Health and Physical Education, Social Studies, and world languages distributed to all teachers.
July 1997	Standards in final three subjects adopted by Board. Reconstitution decision reversed by arbitrator after appeal by Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Summer institute for teachers on content standards for RELA, math, and science (1,100 participants).
September 1997	PRI scores for 1996 and 1997 announced publicly, gains celebrated. Week-long professional development session on content standards (600 participants).
October 1997	Development of curriculum frameworks begins.
January 1998	Curriculum frameworks for ELA, math, science, and social studies distributed to all schools. SAT-9 scores adjusted to correct error by test publisher (two schools removed from "low progress" list).
February 1998	State legislature committee on restructuring Pennsylvania's urban schools proposes break-up of Philadelphia School District.
March 1998	District forecasts $85 million budget deficit for the 1998-1999 school year. District files federal lawsuit against state, alleging civil rights violations based on funding formula that discriminates against poor and minority students.
April 1998	State passes Act 46, colloquially known as the "state takeover bill." SAT-9 administered district-wide in grades 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11.
May 1998	City Council adopts School District budget, relying on letters of credits from banks to avert an early school closure in the 1998-1999 school year.
June 1998	Board adopts new graduation and promotion supports and requirements.
July 1998	Annual summer content institute held.
August 1998	School District celebrates second consecutive year of test score gains.

TABLE 1. REFORM IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE OF EVENTS: CHILDREN ACHIEVING AND THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA
(CONTINUED)

September 1998	PRI Cycle 1 rewards and sanctions announced. Expert panel appointed to review accountability system.
January 1999	David Hornbeck's contract extended for two more years after much speculation.
March 1999	School District presents budget to City Council with projected $94 million deficit for 1999-2000 school year; refuses to make further cuts.
April 1999	Backed by mayor, admission procedures reinstituted for some small learning communities. SAT-9 administered.
May 1999	City Council adopts School District budget; state makes "one-time" contributions to help cover the deficit.
July 1999	Annual summer content institute held.
August 1999	School District announces third year of test score gains, points to "warning signs" that progress is waning.
January 2000	Proficiency exams piloted in grades 9 and 10.
February 2000	School District projects $200 million deficit for school year 2000-2001.
April 2000	SAT-9 administered.
May 2000	City Council adopts budget submitted by board with no new money for the programs the Superintendent felt were required to fully implement *Children Achieving*. Consequently, implementation of new supports and requirements postponed for promotion from eighth grade and for graduation.
June 2000	David Hornbeck announces his resignation.

Central office personnel frequently reinforced these perceptions. They would often work long and hard to produce a tool intended to help school or cluster personnel complete a necessary function, only to undermine their work by failing to contact the field in advance and springing the new tool on them at the last minute. One central office leader described the problems with the execution of school-based budgeting.

In two recent instances, the execution of policy has broken down. One was the budget rollout this year. We worked very hard inside. The operational budget and the categorical budget were done together and budget forms were done on disk. But the rollout was terrible. The presentations were poor and the disks were hard to use...The policy, the idea, the coordination was terrific but the implementation was weak.[90]

Other supports were also rushed in their development and implemented in questionable sequence. In a late 1998 policy meeting, central office leaders lamented that the Curriculum Frameworks had been developed before the graduation and promotion requirements had been completed. What Hess[91] might regard as the "symbolic" reforms, such as structural

[90] Field notes, April 1997.

[91] F.M. Hess, *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999.

changes and accountability mechanisms, were implemented first; it was not until later that the more difficult work of transforming classrooms — the proverbial "horse" — began. Philadelphia leaders did make these so-called 'symbolic' changes first, but in part it was due to their core belief in incentives. Accountability mechanisms were developed first because they produced the strongest incentives for improvement, and student achievement did improve immediately. However, as central office staff began to realize that those incentives were not powerful enough to improve teaching on a large scale, they turned to more prescriptive approaches.

UNDERESTIMATION OF TIME AND SUPPORT

Transforming instruction to a constructivist approach demands much of everyone, particularly those who work in schools. The architects of *Children Achieving*, and the central office staff leading the implementation, underestimated how much time and support it would require. Transforming instruction requires new curriculum and deep changes in teaching that occur only over extended periods of time and with intensive support. The central office did not provide teachers with the curriculum materials needed to do the job, and the accountability system tried to push improvement with time constraints that were unrealistic. Teachers were not trained adequately for standards-based instruction, and many held beliefs that ran contrary to it. Opportunities to participate in content-based professional development, work collaboratively with other teachers, observe expert colleagues, and receive coaching in their own classrooms were eventually increased, but remained inadequate to the enormous task and the demands of the accountability system.

Again, this implementation issue is partly attributable to some of the beliefs underlying the reform, particularly the motto "do it all at once." There was an urgency about the reform effort, especially during the initial years of *Children Achieving*, that was admirable but that contributed to the underestimation of what it would take to improve the entire district. The urgency stemmed from several sources. In the initial months of the reform effort, its leaders were driven primarily by their passionate desire to improve conditions for children. They also believed that obtaining additional funding hinged on improved performance. Later in the reform effort this urgency was fed by the state's threat to take over the district.

Faced with these demands, central office leaders responded with an endless rollout of information about the reforms to clusters and schools. They acted as though teachers learned through knowledge transmission, even while they were encouraging teachers to use constructivist pedagogy with students. Constructivism, as noted earlier, rests on the ideas that learning is social and requires active engagement among teachers and learners. While there was acknowledgment of the need for this approach to student instruction, there was little recognition of the need for

teachers and other school staff to have the same type of learning opportunities to help them understand how to implement a constructivist, standards-based system.

LESSONS FOR REFORMING DISTRICTS

This report describes how both the policies and rhetoric of District leaders and central office staff in Philadelphia changed over the course of the *Children Achieving* reform, shifting from a focus on decentralization toward a more prescriptive approach. Central office personnel saw this as a rational response to what they encountered as they attempted to implement the reforms. The limited capacities and willingness of school staffs to implement many of the programs were major obstacles to reformers. Left to their own devices, many school staffs floundered and others selected strategies that were inconsistent with the central office vision, particularly with constructivism, the pedagogical approach promoted in *Children Achieving*.

Our own research in the schools suggests that there were serious capacity problems in the schools, and there certainly was resistance to some of the central tenets of the reform. The evaluation team observed many examples of dysfunctional school communities, well-meaning but under-prepared teachers and principals, and questionable instructional practices that sacrificed content and meaning for prescription and order. But the capacity of school staffs to improve teaching and learning was only one of the reasons for the shift from school autonomy to more central office prescription. The second section of this report described the insufficient capacity of the central office to support school-initiated reforms, the flaws in implementation that occurred, and the contradictions inherent in Philadelphia's theory of action. These problems also forced the central office to become increasingly reliant on mandates, directives, and centralized authority. In the end, Philadelphia's leadership did not have the strategic vision, the resources, or the patience to support school-based reform.

What might other school districts undertaking systemic reform learn from the Philadelphia experience? Our analysis of central office policy, implementation, and capacity during *Children Achieving* suggests that school districts would probably experience greater success if local leaders:

- Clarified roles and values;
- Acknowledged the varying capacities of personnel at all levels of the district;
- Collaborated with and showed respect for stakeholders;
- Understood how schools perceived standards;
- Maintained focus and managed the burden on school employees; and
- Recognized the trade-offs between alignment and autonomy.

We elaborate on these lessons in the remainder of this report.

CLARIFY ROLES AND VALUES

The implementation of *Children Achieving* was hampered from the beginning by conflicts between the basic beliefs underlying the reform and the roles assigned to the central office in plans for carrying it out. Early in this report we identified five foundational values underlying *Children Achieving* — the primacy of results, the importance of equity, the value of increased school autonomy, the need for strong incentives, and the imperative to "do it all at once." We also discussed the four roles assigned to the central office in the *Children Achieving* Strategic Action Design: setting standards, building capacity, holding schools accountable, and monitoring equity. Each of these roles offered opportunities for central office staff to assume increased authority and reduce school autonomy. Given the early implementation problems, the resistance of the teachers' union, and the vast majority of school employees to components of the reforms, and the promise to produce results, it is understandable that the central office staff were tempted to take full advantage of these roles to specify the reforms in the schools. Initially, the capacity-building role was most problematic for central office staff. It seemed to be in direct conflict with the core values of school autonomy and focusing on results. Capacity-building implies provision of guidance and guidance implies direction.

Two of the other central office roles — holding schools accountable and monitoring equity — were closely linked in *Children Achieving's* theory of action. Our analysis shows that the early results from the accountability system, combined with a strong emphasis on equity, led the central office to develop stronger and more prescriptive signals to schools about what and how to teach. Annual student achievement testing revealed inequities associated with race and ethnicity, family income, and language background. Despite their commitments to autonomy and results, central office personnel convinced themselves that more prescriptive approaches were necessary to ensure that all students had fair opportunities to learn. Outcomes could not be separated from opportunities to learn. As the central office became more prescriptive in the name of equity, they became increasingly less concerned about ensuring that school personnel had the freedom to make their own decisions.

Of course successful implementation of reforms does not mean blindly following an initial plan. Indeed, some authors identify the ability to alter plans as an important characteristic of successful implementation.[92] However, we believe that Philadelphia's shift to more prescriptive approaches reflected confusion about central office roles and values, distrust of school personnel and the absence of a coherent capacity-building strategy rather than a thoughtful response to the needs of the field. Prescription itself is not always bad, nor is school autonomy always desirable. However, once roles and responsibilities for carrying out reforms

[92] For example, see R.F. Elmore, "Getting to scale with good educational practice." *Harvard Educational Review, 66* (1996), pp. 1-26.

were defined, staff needed reasonable opportunities to enact them. This meant time, materials, and training. It also meant maintaining some coherence in policies and actions. In Philadelphia, the initial rhetoric about decentralization was not matched with the time or support needed to make it work. Instead, as school staffs struggled to understand and use their newly-granted autonomy, they were almost immediately overwhelmed with new central office mandates. This shift bred anger, mistrust, cynicism, and resistance in the schools and it ultimately undermined the implementation of the reforms.

Other districts embarking on systemic reform should delineate roles and responsibilities carefully, and should then act in a coherent and consistent manner. Assignments should be based on hard-headed assessments of capacity and motivation to improve rather than ideological commitments to ideas like decentralization. Leaders should avoid assigning responsibilities to employees who lack either the knowledge or motivation to carry them out. Rather, they should provide the direction, scaffolding, tools, materials, training, and incentives necessary to help acquire increased competence as they make progress. The experience of success can be a powerful motivator to acquire new knowledge and skill.

ACKNOWLEDGE VARYING CAPACITY

Another lesson from *Children Achieving* is that both district and school capacity must be considered before taking on large-scale reform. School and cluster personnel perceived *Children Achieving* as a one-size-fits-all reform effort. Everyone had to do it all, all at once, and all the same way. Despite early efforts to give schools more autonomy, teachers and principals experienced the reforms as mandates from above. Promises to allow some flexibility in how reform initiatives like small learning communities were carried out were set aside when district-wide standards were set and then used for evaluative purposes. Some school and cluster personnel bristled at central guidance that they felt disregarded the experience of principals and the expertise of teachers, while others clamored for more guidance. Similarly, *Children Achieving* assumed that all central office staff had the knowledge and ability needed to design and lead their parts of the reform effort.

Like schools, central offices, depending on their staffing and other resources, vary in their capacity to define and support reform. The School District of Philadelphia did not have the capacity to take on such an ambitious reform effort, at any level of the system, and insufficient efforts were made to improve the system's capacity. The School District lacked the finances needed to conduct its regular operation and, hence, supports for the reform initiatives were often under-funded. Resource scarcity limited the School District's ability to provide time for teachers and other District personnel to receive professional development, to develop curriculum, and to work with colleagues. It also hampered the District's ability to hire qualified personnel for key positions in schools and in the central office. High turnover

in key staff positions and cuts in administrative staff based at the central office further exacerbated the capacity problem.

Other districts should address this issue upfront when planning large-scale reform efforts. To do this, districts might sequence the implementation of components so that support can be concentrated, spend more time educating personnel about reform elements prior to implementation, and delay accountability consequences until personnel have received sufficient opportunities to develop the necessary skills and the tools needed to do the work.

COLLABORATE WITH AND SHOW RESPECT FOR STAKEHOLDERS

The District's limited capacity to support *Children Achieving* was not simply a matter of scarce fiscal resources. Lack of skill in negotiating relationships with constituencies such as the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the state, and the business community contributed to conflicts that had extremely negative impacts on the implementation of *Children Achieving*. These conflicts might have been avoided or managed more effectively. Teaching, even within small learning communities, is demanding work and it is by and large private work. Its efficacy depends on both the commitment and the competence of the practitioner. If you attack them as a group, you will not gain their commitment. If you do not provide them with timely opportunities to acquire new skills and with the tools they need, you will not build their confidence that they are competent to make the changes. If you send them mixed messages, they will rely on the approaches they know best. The Philadelphia District leaders did all of these things and failed to win the commitment of their teaching force to the reforms. Philadelphia leadership consistently underestimated the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with these important stakeholders. They discounted constituent perspectives, experiences, and ultimately, their power to hurt or help the School District. Other districts considering systemic reform efforts should work to collaborate with key stakeholders whenever possible and, at minimum, give respect to their perspectives and experiences.

MAINTAIN FOCUS

Perhaps the most compelling and most onerous belief underlying *Children Achieving* was that all aspects of the reform had to be implemented at once. Hornbeck's assertions that every part of the system plays a role in student achievement, that piecemeal reform does more harm than good, and that comprehensive efforts were needed to achieve significant improvement initially inspired Philadelphians. While it is true that enormous effort is needed to transform troubled urban school systems, as *Children Achieving* wound down, it became clear that "doing it all at once" had been an ill-conceived strategy.

"Doing it all at once" stretched the limited capacity of the system to the

breaking point by asking District personnel to design, implement, and understand a large set of reforms in quick succession. It contributed to poor sequencing and mixed signals. Since everything was a priority, the time and support required to implement various components of reform was routinely underestimated. Reform overload became a major obstacle to successful implementation. There was little time to prepare the ground for the reforms, to build capacity, or to receive feedback from the field and review and revise policy. It is not surprising that, to schools and clusters, central office policies felt like unsupported mandates. The core value of "doing it all at once" increased the sense of top-down control by the central office, conflicting with the initial efforts to increase school autonomy and leading to further centralization.

Children Achieving illustrates how focus can be lost when a sweeping vision and ambitious improvement plans are pursued at a furious pace. Staff at all levels of the District expressed frustration with reform overload. Our research and the research literature in general are clear that maintaining focus over time is essential to substantive educational improvement. This was difficult in Philadelphia due to the number of reforms being implemented simultaneously and the gaps between the amount of time provided to implement them and what was actually needed. Other districts attempting to take on ambitious reforms should not sacrifice their strategic vision of system-wide transformation, but they should think through how they sequence their actions, and keep the burdens manageable.

USE STANDARDS CAREFULLY

Under *Children Achieving*, one of the functions of the central office was to set standards. As the central office staff recognized the need to provide schools with more guidance about how to carry out the reforms, they drew on this authority. In addition to content and performance standards, the central office staff defined "process" standards that spelled out acceptable practice in a variety of areas. They set standards for local school councils, small learning communities, professional development, teaching practice, project learning, service learning, the comprehensive support process, and so on. These standards were perceived by central office staff as a benign form of guidance, and as different from mandates. Standards, in their view, implied advocacy for quality rather than exercise of authority and control.

However, to school staff, these "process" standards were just prescriptions in another form. And as cluster and central office staff used these various sets of standards to determine whether schools were complying with the reforms, they clearly were viewed as regulatory mandates. Simply calling them standards did not change the fact that they felt like regulations to the school staffs.

Other districts can learn from this experience. If the idea of standards is to define an ideal state of affairs, then

deviation should be expected across contexts. This is especially true of "process" standards. In a decentralized environment, the central office can simply acknowledge that there will be deviations across contexts, maybe even encourage it, and focus on results rather than compliance, or they can define the parameters of acceptable behavior and the conditions under which deviations will be permitted. But it is probably important to distinguish between how standards and regulations are applied, and what the consequences are for deviation. The former imply some professional legitimacy, some basis in knowledge or experience, but also targets to be worked toward rather than rules to be complied with.

RECOGNIZE THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN ALIGNMENT AND AUTONOMY

The problems of implementation were serious in Philadelphia, but we have concluded that there was a design flaw in *Children Achieving* that was even more serious. As described in the introduction to this report, systemic reform assumes well-aligned accountability and assessment systems **and** local control and development of curriculum. The idea is that a central authority (a state, or in Philadelphia's case, the School District's central office) sets content and performance standards and holds schools accountable, but gives schools the opportunity to determine the best means of reaching those standards. In theory this includes control over their budgets, their personnel, and their curriculum. What we believe to be the flaw in this theory is that high-stakes accountability and assessment systems are not tolerant of diverse curricula. If schools are to be held accountable for what students learn, the assessment system must be aligned with what teachers teach. There are two ways this alignment can be achieved: the central authority can prescribe the curriculum or it can create strong incentives for teachers to align their curricula with the assessment. If the assessment offers no options and measures specific knowledge and skill, then the results are similar in either case. The concepts, facts, and skills children should know and be able to do (as identified in content standards), and the specific subject matter, learning activities, and their general sequence, are prescribed either through curriculum policy or assessment specifications. Central office staff may tell school staff that they should attend to the content standards rather than to the test. They may tell them that they have the freedom to develop their own curricula based on the content standards. Initially in Philadelphia, with the stakes high and teachers' confidence in students low, schools chose to focus on the SAT-9 test and opt for test preparation as the core curriculum. Later, the central office began to see tests as "the tail that wags the dog" and strove to use assessments in lieu of curriculum to specify curriculum and restructure courses of study.

We are not suggesting that centralizing curriculum is a better way to reform schools. Rather, what our experience in Philadelphia reveals is that there is a trade-off between heavy reliance on

uniform assessment systems and school and teacher control over curricular content in high-stakes accountability environments. Paradoxically, systemic reform promises high alignment and high autonomy. It cannot deliver both.

The Philadelphia central office staff lived out this contradiction as they worked to implement *Children Achieving*. Initially, they focused on decentralizing authority to schools, and giving school staff opportunities to make their own decisions. They set standards and established an accountability mechanism that included incentives for schools to improve their performance. They were criticized because the test they selected did not match their standards perfectly, so they worked to improve the alignment. They were also criticized because the accountability system seemed to be encouraging increased test preparation in the District's classrooms. Some, in turn, criticized the teachers for their failure to understand that the creative constructivist approaches would work better than test preparation.

As results from the testing pointed out the wide disparities in outcomes and fair opportunities to learn for low-income students, students of color, and English language learners, the central office sought to even the playing field by further tightening the alignment between what was tested and what was taught. As the Hornbeck administration came to an end, central office staff and the Board of Education were developing new tests in every subject area for grades 7-12. These tests were intended to clearly signal to teachers what to teach. The shift from a decentralized approach to curriculum to a highly centralized one was complete, and it was the District's response to the trade-off between alignment and autonomy.

Mandating a specific curriculum or creating tests that drive the curriculum are two of the options facing school districts trying to promote system-wide reform. These ideas lack appeal to progressive educators who value teacher and school autonomy and creativity. Giving schools and teachers complete authority over what they teach is another option, but it would leave districts with no way to compare schools or to identify and remedy inequities in the distribution of achievement. This option also ignores the lesson laid out earlier in this section, about the need to acknowledge the varying capacities of schools and teachers. Some teachers and some schools, provided the opportunity, would do well given the chance to plan all their curricular activities and the resources to enact them, but others would flounder. Not every school's staff is equally ready for nor able to capitalize on the responsibility that accompanies this degree of autonomy.

If both alignment and autonomy are valued, school districts could design more flexible policies that address the need for both. For example, districts might create curricula that cover some proportion of the school year, perhaps 50 percent. District-wide assessments would focus on the mandated curriculum. For the other half of the year, schools and teachers would be free to develop and follow their own curricula and assessments. Another

option would be to trade off alignment for autonomy by giving schools that meet rigorous performance criteria — including performance on standardized tests, as well as other, more qualitative measures of achievement and capacity — freedom from some or all of the curricular or testing requirements. Yet a third option would be to offer schools alternative assessments and let them determine which best aligns with the curriculum of their choice. A fourth is to offer teachers and students options within a common assessment framework. This is the approach used successfully by the Cambridge Overseas Evaluation Syndicate. The current trend seems to be to pursue tighter alignment at the expense of school autonomy, but if the Philadelphia experience is any guide, this may not be the most fruitful choice.

REMAINING QUESTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Philadelphia School District is the nation's sixth largest with nearly 215,000 students — 80 percent of whom are children of color, and 80 percent of whom live in poverty. Philadelphia's composition and problems are fairly typical of other large urban districts: problems such as limited finances, poor labor relations, and deteriorating support from key constituencies. Educators, researchers, and policymakers who are considering the implementation of system-wide reform face the challenges of translating a broad vision into practice, and doing it in a timely way before yet another generation of students is left behind.

It is hard to improve education practice system-wide in a large school district. It is hard because policymakers cannot mandate the commitment and motivation required of teachers and students. It is hard because systemic reform requires a focused effort to build internal capacity. It is hard because fundamental changes in attitudes, beliefs, and traditional practices are required. It is hard because these are costly endeavors and urban school districts need additional resources and political support to make these changes happen. It is hard because it takes time to make the changes in teaching and learning needed to produce meaningful results.

The School District of Philadelphia is one of the few large urban school districts that has attempted an ambitious systemic reform without being mandated to do so by a court, state, or mayoral takeover. Although many mistakes were made in theory, design, and implementation, *Children Achieving* offered some positive lessons as well. Urban school district leaders can, as Philadelphia has shown us, offer a vision of improvement, reorganize an entrenched bureaucracy, and implement standards and accountability. Understanding how to encourage and create widespread improvements in teaching and learning is the next crucial step. While *Children Achieving* fell far short of the vision of re-energized learning communities that motivated its architects, it did raise expectations for the city's children and reframed the debates about the future of public education in Philadelphia.

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